

ed as a team.

Oxford City 1, Wycombe Wanderers 1

THE streets of Oxford rang long and loud on Thursday night as Wycombe Wanderers' fanatical supporters celebrated their team's return from a 14 year exile to reign supreme once more over the Isthmian League.

At last, the champagne, kept on ice since Wycombe's 1957 championship campaign, can flow as freely as the football which has brought them fresh glory in 1971.

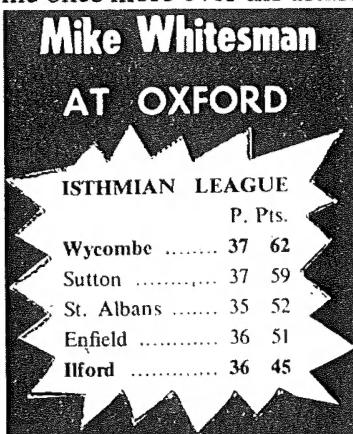
They travelled to City's compact White House ground in search of the point that would carry them one step beyond the reach of nearest challengers, Sutton United. And, despite two dramatic first half setbacks, plus perhaps Oxford's liveliest display of the season, Wanderers made it.

So the visit of Ilford to Loakes Park on May 1 is now just a formality, even if, by half time on Thursday it began to look as though Wycombe might still be chasing that point by then.

For Wanderers ended the opening 45 minutes one goal adrift and with skipper John Delaney being driven to a local hospital to have two stitches in a cut over his right eye.

Oxford's programme notes promised home fans "we shall not be in benevolent mood tonight". It was no idle threat. City, with busy number eight, Mick Holifield, a frequent thorn in Wanderers' side, kept Wycombe guessing right until the final whistle. Even when the visitors equalised soon after the interval, the result could have gone either way.

Oxford's undoubtedly im-



provement since earlier clashes ruined any Wycombe blueprint to seal their title with a runaway victory.

Wanderers unwound slowly, using much of their early nervous energy in a succession of uncharacteristically iron-hard tackles.

The defence, which had played such an imperative role at Sutton, lacked concentration in those opening skirmishes, and Oxford took their cue through Holified and former Marlow prospect, Bobby Marcham, to set the pattern of the evening.

City's 28th minute breakthrough was therefore not a complete surprise. How could it be while Wycombe made so many elementary errors? It was a monumental blunder that opened the path to goal for the

home side, as the visitors stood playing statues awaiting an offside decision that never came.

In the direct line of fire, Fuschillo let Silto swing the ball inside off the left wing, while the ever attentive Ian Rundle alone raced across to cover John Maskell. Silto resisted the temptation to over-hurry before crossing neatly for Holifield, whose header soared to the right of the net with the 'keeper flying through the air in vain.

Suitably penitent for their carelessness, Wycombe's more creative nature emerged via a series of chances and corners before the break. But City took every encouragement from those early lapses displaying an admirable faith in themselves up front.

The loss of Delaney after a goalmouth clash of heads two minutes into first half injury time, therefore struck the visitors doubly-hard. Substitute Geoff Anthony came on seconds before the interval whistle, yet however hard he worked, nothing could compensate the loss of Delaney's heading ability both in defence and in attack for set pieces.

It hardly took a computer brain to figure out the league leaders had absolutely nothing to lose by risking all out attack in the second half. They worked efficiently with three men at the back, but couldn't help but leave gaps for the quick-witted City forwards to probe.

Marcham caused anxiety in the 53rd minute by beating three defenders and centring the ball across goal where, fortunately for Wycombe's fully-exposed defence, neither Holified nor Silto could transfer it home.

Three minutes later, Wanderers navigated their course back to the title when Tony Horseman's corner flew off the right to find Keith Searle for a flashing drive at the net. Metcalfe stuck out a foot, but only managed to plant the ball further over the line.

The equaliser ran with play and afforded the many hundreds of Wycombe loyalists present, something fresh to shout about. But within minutes they fell silent for a brief moment as Holifield headed the ball into the visitors' goal again.

This time though, Mr. Leonard cancelled the score for an infringement on 'keeper Maskell.

Oxford, running out of luck but not steam, insisted on keeping the heat turned on, although Maskell's A.I. handling form eased the tension to a great extent. Instances like a 20 yard left footer from Holifield in the 64th minute reminded the visitors that the one point they needed was not definitely theirs quite yet awhile, for all their front running.

Employing the nippy Barry Baker in a bridging role, and Larry Pritchard as the architect upfront, Wycombe re-discovered the brand of confidence and command which has proved the envy of every amateur club this season.

Signs that Oxford, for all their determination, were finally in harness, grew clearer with every passing minute. Marcham, one of several home players to suffer niggling injuries, limped off after 77 minutes to be replaced by Mullins. And soon Holifield's influence on proceedings was considerably reduced following a clash with Keith Blunt, from which the City striker came off second best.

So intense and uncertain were the final minutes for both sides that when Baker lost his left boot, it took him five minutes plus the majority of injury time, to find a spare moment to put it back on.

Yet, without ever reproducing top form, Wanderers were well worth the vital point that makes them mathematically invulnerable as Isthmian League leaders.

Oxford certainly fulfilled their programme promise, but, then, to re-iterate the sentiments I expressed last August after the Wanderers season had begun with a 3-2 home win over Walthamstow . . .

No one gives anything away to a team with the power to take it all!

OXFORD CITY: P. Harris; A. Mitchell, M. Grafton, E. Metcalfe, A. Doucher, T. Stokes, J. Woodley, M. Holifield, I. Ross, R. Marcham (Sub.: B. Mullins, 77 mins.), W. Silto.

WYCOMBE WANDERERS: J. Maskell; P. Fuschillo, K. Blunt, E. Powell, J. Delaney (Sub.: G. Anthony, 45 mins.), I. Rundle, B. Bremer, B. Baker, K. Searle, L. Pritchard, A. Horseman.

Referee: Mr. L. Leonard (Luton).
Half time: 1-0. Goalscorers: Ox-